

Siz Shver Zol Zayn a Yid: Anti-Semitism is Alive and Well: But So Are We Rabbi Dan Dorsch

Tonight, I am going to give the sermon that when I entered into the rabbinate I swore I was never going to give: because I was never going to be the rabbi who never talked about guilt. I had big plans: I was going to be the rabbi who each high holy days left my community feeling uplifted and who talked about what Judaism was going to do for your life, not *siz shver zol zayn a yid*, how hard it is to be a Jew. I was never going to be the rabbi who was **ever** going to give a sermon about anti-Semitism.

Why? For me, the reason was obvious. Personal experience. Throughout my life, I have been blessed to know no direct anti-Semitism, and neither thank God, have my children. Not once has someone intentionally, or even in ignorance made me feel uncomfortable, let alone, discriminated against me, because I am Jewish. When I was a teenager, my parents were concerned about my decision to begin wearing my kippah in public. They thought it left me vulnerable to anti-Semitism. Well, like most teenagers, I didn't listen. And nearly twenty years later I keep waiting for them to be right. A few months ago, I walked into Home Depot where I ran into a man with a Ten Gallon Hat and a Texas swagger who looked at me and said, "hey son, are you Jewish?" After a bit of trepidation, unsure of what to say, expecting finally my moment of anti-Semitism, I said yes, I am sir, in fact I am a rabbi. He then turned to me and said "*Isn't it just wonderful that we have our embassy now in Jerusalem!*" The next Shabbat I walked to shul with Zev, and a man rolled down his window, pointed me and said, "hey you!" Again, I expected to finally hear some anti-Semitism, only for the man to say, "Have a blessed Sabbath my Jewish friend." I was sitting in the car listening to a story about the Atlanta Jewish Musical Festival on NPR when Zev turned to me and said "Daddy, can you tell me why so many people love Jews?" My heart stopped. Love Jews? Wow. Is that what my son thinks? That's why I didn't want to give a sermon on anti-Semitism.

Tonight, I also didn't want to give a sermon on anti-Semitism because until recently, I wanted to believe in my heart that anti-Semitism was a problem of a bygone era. That we'd put it behind us in the modern world. Generations of rabbis before me had spent decades talking about anti-Semitism: but certainly, it was not a problem for millennials, who, using technology, are building a better world.

And that myth that I lived by was all well and good until Pittsburgh happened. And then, I started to collect a file. Here it is: all of the anti-Semitic incidents that occurred since last Yom Kippur. It's not even close to all of it.

And so let me now tell you why I have no choice, why I must give a sermon tonight on anti-Semitism.

Tonight, I must talk about anti-Semitism because even though we come to shul looking to be uplifted, to be encouraged to have positive Jewish experiences, we also come to Kol Nidrei to reflect on what we see in the world. And just as the sounding of the Shofar stirs our souls and warns us to wake up to that which threatens our souls, we cannot afford to ignore that which is a threat to our very existence: And foremost, the one great looming concern, for Jews who are observant, for Jews who are not, Jews who identify, and Jews who hide, is Anti-Semitism. From Poway to Pittsburgh to beatings in Brooklyn. To members of our government accusing us of being disloyal, to celebrities posting online claiming that the Star of David has become a symbol of oppression, rather than the symbol of a people long oppressed. To unfair criticism of Israel from movements like BDS. It has been there this year, in abundance and unrelenting. That is why tonight, I must give a sermon on anti-Semitism.

Tonight, I must give a sermon on anti-Semitism because while I have been blessed to know no anti-Semitism in the community in which we live, in East Cobb we must come out of our bubble and recognize that we are privileged Jews. Let's say it: we are blessed. In America, we live in the most influential, safe Jewish community that has ever existed at any point in Jewish history. Yet while in East Cobb, without a moment's hesitation I get to wear my kippah for my 10 Gallon Hatted Good Shabbos, France reports a 74% rise in anti-Semitic incidents this past year. People are afraid to be Jewish in public. In a scene out of the movie Borat, in Belgium, the Capital of the European Union, a parade float featured two Orthodox Jewish figures with big noses sitting on a pile of money. Perhaps that is because a CNN poll reports that one-third of Europeans know nothing about the Holocaust. But not to worry! Because you know who does know all about the Holocaust? Our partner for peace in Ramallah, Mahmoud Abbas, the long time leader of the Palestinian authority. He literally--*and I am not making this up*--earned his PhD in the field of Holocaust Denial. And lest you think he's put that past behind him, in 2018, he gave a speech proclaiming that the Holocaust and "hatred towards the Jews did not occur because of their religion but because of their social roles related to taxes and banking." This is the leader of the Palestinians paving the way forward to peace with a country of Jews next door. Even in England, when speaking about his successor, the head of its labor party Jeremy Corbyn, possibly England's next Prime Minister, Tony Blair has said that the only explanation for Corbyn being an anti-Semite is that he does not even realize "what he is saying is anti-Semitic."

Tonight, I must give a sermon on anti-Semitism because as much as we millennials think that with the coming of modernity and technology we will solve problems like prejudice, the internet has only made it worse: in the form of digital anti-Semitism. Lest we forget, the Pittsburgh shooter was radicalized and influenced by a website called Gab. Gab is safe haven for those who are too meshuga for Facebook--and that's saying something--for Neo-Nazis and white-supremacists to exchange ideas. It has one million users. The internet today gives like minded people of hate, once isolated, disproportionate influence over our social conversation. What other explanation could there be for AirBnB, a huge company, in a move encouraged by the anti-Semitic BDS movement, deciding to refuse to list listings in the West Bank? AirBNB is in Tehran, the home of an autocratic oppressive regime. There are AirBNBs in Kashmir, a disputed territory of India and Pakistan. There are AirBNBs in North Korea. But until a lawsuit and press forced them to change their mind, AirBNB refused to do business in the West Bank of the Jordan River.

Which is why tonight, despite that voice inside of me that tells me not to, I have decided to speak out. Because Jews throughout each and every generation like me naively dismissed anti-Semitism as an old-world problem, but in each generation, we've been proven wrong. In Spain, under Ferdinand and Isabella, Jews rose to positions of prominence. Don Isaac Abarbanel, the famous Torah commentator, was the Spanish crown's Chief Financial Officer. Spain was a Golden Age for Jewish life. We declared anti-Semitism over. Until 1492, when Ferdinand and Isabella initiated the inquisition, killed Jews who didn't convert, and even when we did called us "marranos," pigs. When Hitler came to power in Germany, German Jews dismissed him as a crackpot. Who, him? They said: "not in our enlightened country." That is, until he did come to power, and we all know the rest. So much for the era of German modern enlightenment.

And my friends, we see those trends again in the world. Even if there are no gas chambers or inquisitions, today we have members of US Congress whose hatred for Israel and Jews exceeds their love for their own grandparents. During the 2018 elections, a congregant from Etz Chaim sent a text message to a group of friends about supporting a Jewish candidate, and she accidentally put in a wrong number. She received a text with the message: "I'm not voting for her, I am voting for the Neo-Nazi Candidate #Jewscum #Blitzkrieg #MakeGermanyGreatAgain."

On Kol Nidrei, I want to remind all of us here that as Jews none of us is ever above criticism. In fact, if Yom Kippur reminds us of anything, it is that Jews relish in self-criticism. "Guilt," to quote Fran Drescher on the Nanny, "has been very good to our people." As Jews, feeling guilty about things we have done wrong on Yom Kippur can be an invaluable vehicle for personal growth.

Yet I must admit that it seems like this year, 5779, there has been a lot of criticism, most of it coming not from a place of care or concern or a desire for us to grow, but from those who want us to disappear. The three Ds of Natan Sharansky: delegitimization, double standards, and demonization: This criticism runs sadly from the halls of Washington to the streets of Tehran.

Which is why, this Kol Nidrei, on a year when I felt compelled to finally give a sermon on anti-Semitism, I want to leave you with two asks tonight:

First, what I hope is a given: That **we must as Jews**, not shy away from responding to this renewed bigotry and calling out anti-Semitism when we see it. As Americans and Jews we have become so accustomed, rightfully so, to fighting bigotry in all of its forms. You may not know that it was Jews who founded the ACLU, the ADL, and even the NAACP, all because we knew what it was like to experience hatred. And so now that bigotry 1.0, anti-Semitism has once again reared its ugly head, once again we must turn to ourselves, and ask our true friends and allies to join us in this fight. When we see neo-Nazis, when we hear the phrase "Jew them down" from a New Jersey mayor, when we hear Palestine "From the river to the Sea," let's call it out for what it is: bigotry. As Jews and as proud Americans who fight bigotry in all of its forms, we must redouble our efforts to fight this scourge that has come around the world, and also now to us.

Yet I would be remiss if I did not also charge us, secondly, this year, more than any other year, not only to take "to the fight," but to look at why we fight in the first place. For us to take renewed pride in being Jewish and living Jewishly. Because the best way to fight anti-Semitism, is simply to live as Jews, to put on our kippot, and to show the world *mir zaynen do*, that we are here, and proud. We must not, to quote Ari Hoffman in the Forward, "continue to be upset over accusations of disloyalty, [if we are unwilling to do] the hard work of remembering that *Jewish loyalty* is what has kept us here so long" in the first place. We must, to quote NYTimes writer Bari Weiss, who was Bat Mitzvahed in the Tree of Life Synagogue, "fight an affirmative battle for who we are by entering the fray for our values, our ideas: for our ancestors, our families, and for the generations that will come after us."

The notorious anti-Semite Arnold Toynbe, who hated Jews with every fiber of his being, once observed that when push came to shove, the greatest miracle of the world was how despite people like him, that the Jewish people continued to survive.

Friends: the sad truth is that thirty years from now, I will, God willing, be standing on this bimah. And I can guarantee that I will sadly, need to give another sermon about anti-Semitism. And three hundred years from now, there will be another rabbi on this bimah. And he or she or perhaps Siri will also give a sermon on anti-Semitism. They too will say: *Siz shver zol zayn a yid*, It is hard to be a Jew.

But if we in this room put on our kippot; if we call out anti-Semitism where we see it; if we light Shabbos candles, send our kids to get a Jewish education, if we celebrate holidays, if we show our children and grandchildren that we are proud to be Jews and not afraid: I also know that thirty years from now your children will be here to hear that sermon. And I also know that three hundred years from now, that there will be Jews around, our descendants, to hear that sermon. We will have Jews not only surviving, but thriving, even more blessed than we are to live in the wonderful, free country we live in today.

Today, the most infamous anti-Semites of history--the Pharaohs, Ferdinands and Isabellas, the Hitlers have all gone the way of the dustbin of history--while we, the dust of Eretz Yisrael that God promised Abraham and Sarah would be so vast that it could not be counted, are still here and always will be. Anti-Semitism may still be around, but God willing, so will our descendants: descendants who will fight their parents about whether they can wear a kippah outside, descendants who will get a "have a blessed Sabbath my Jewish friend," all because we will have taken a stand and declared *Am Yisrael Chai*, the Jewish people, will live on forever.

That is why tonight, I gave a sermon on anti-Semitism.